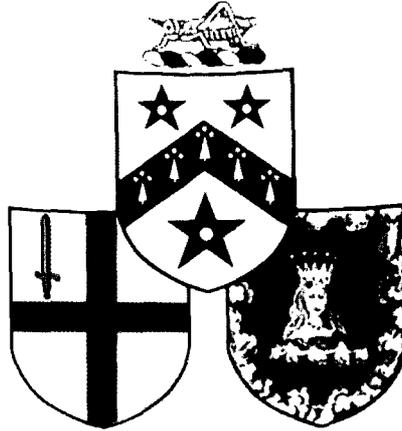


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THE MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY

Lecture 4

THE MYTH OF JUSTIFICATION

by

PROFESSOR RICHARD HOLLOWAY
Gresham Professor of Divinity

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The Myth of Justification by Faith

Professor Richard Holloway

In my first lecture in this series I referred to Thomas Kuhn's ground-breaking essay, 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions'. One of Kuhn's most persuasive insights was that science was human and that shifts in scientific thinking, paradigm shifts, are prompted by social forces as well as by what we might think of as pure science. This should not surprise us, of course, but it is worth repeating, because one of the permanent fallacies we commit in all the human disciplines is to accord them an objectivity they cannot have. So we imagine that the ideal scientific experiment is one that is completely clinical and abstracted, conducted from some kind of bunker that insulates the scientist from outside influences. No such isolation is possible or desirable. There is no way we can get ourselves out of our skin or out of our social and cultural context. Even a scientist as rigorous as Darwin, in finding a narrative in which to express his discoveries, had to use metaphors that clearly came from nineteenth century capitalism, with its notion of struggle and the survival of the fittest. When Kuhn used the Copernican revolution as an example of how paradigm shifts occurred, he recognised that new social needs, as well as scientific discoveries, contributed to the replacement of the Ptolemaic paradigm by the Copernican one.

If non-scientific factors contribute to the work of science, then it is certainly the case that non-theological factors contribute to the work of theology. I would go further and say that there are no such things as purely theological factors. There may be objective elements in theology such as the claims of revelation and historical debates over their meaning, but the work of theology is an inescapably human work. In addition to the human factors involved, scientists do have an external reality to work on and look at in the form of everything other than themselves that exists. Theologians, in spite of the claims they make to the contrary, do not have access to an equivalent metaphysical reality from which they can make deductions and conduct experiments. Everything they have to deal with comes from within the human envelope. Theology is more like psychology than geology; its another way of describing human experience and its struggles with itself. The proof of this is that, even if we assert the existence of a reality other than ourselves that reveals itself to us, we are inescapably fixed on the human end of that experience and cannot know the Other as it is in itself, but only as we receive it or have known it. The reason theological dispute is so endless is that there are no empirical experiments that can obviously settle them, the way we might settle a dispute over the exact temperature of the boiling point of water or establish the age of an artefact by carbon dating. This will only disturb us if we have persuaded ourselves that when we are doing theology we are dealing with a substance other than ourselves. Whereas the enduringly fascinating thing about theology is that it provides us with a mirror into our own souls. This is particularly the case when we come to examine one of the most fascinating and complex of the Christian theological themes, the idea of Justification by Faith.

In John Osborne's great play about him, he relates Luther's discovery of the significance of this great theme in Paul's Letter to the Romans to the German reformer's constipation, to which he was a martyr. W.H.Auden made the same point when he said that 'Revelation came to Luther in the privy'.¹ In Osborne's play the release of the great idea that ignited the Reformation exactly coincides with a massive evacuation of Luther's bowels. Luther's anguish was caused

¹ W.H.Auden, *About the House*, Faber, London, 1958, p.27.

by the fact that he felt incapable of achieving the perfection God required of him. Many of the great religious geniuses have been souls in torment about themselves who found peace through the discovery of a spiritual truth that rescued them from despair. Buddhism is one of the most attractive examples of how human anguish can prompt people to the search for a costly peace. The story is well known of the young prince who renounced worldly glory to seek salvation, and discovered that the stumbling block to his own salvation, and the cause of all human misery, was desire or craving. If he could get rid of that desire, banish that craving, he would know the peace of high Nirvana. The genius of Buddhism is that it is a Middle Way that repudiates two extremes, the worthless life of self-indulgence and the equally worthless life of self-torture. The difference between Buddhism and Christianity is that Buddhism is essentially a practice, an arduous discipline that can deliver peace and compassion to its adherents. Christianity also has its spiritual disciplines, but it also believes that its doctrines are themselves saving and life-changing. Much of this goes back to the originating genius of Christian theology, Saul of Tarsus who became Paul. The paradox is that what for Paul was a liberating psychological experience was later to be hardened into a formula that radically contradicted his original insight and the experience that prompted it.

It is hazardous to guess at the psychological disposition of long-dead people who are only known to us through their writing, but Paul did provide us with a lot of material for our speculations; he disclosed much of himself in a series of letters that are a valuable tool for our exercise in detection. William James divided people into healthy and sick souls, into people with equable dispositions and people who are internally conflicted and divided. Paul seems to have been an example of the latter. He tells us in the Letter to the Romans that he is puzzled by the divisions in his own nature:

[15] I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [16] Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. [17] But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

[21] So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. [22] For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, [23] but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. [24] Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? [25]²

The orthodox way to interpret Paul's personal anguish is to say that he sought to make himself perfect through the minute observance of the Torah or holiness code of the Jewish people. He tells us in the Letter to the Galatians that he was a strict practitioner of the way of his people:

[13] You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. [14] I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.³

An insight from Rabbi Lionel Blue may help us here. In a lecture he gave in Edinburgh he remarked on the different ways the followers of the three great monotheistic religions go mad. In Judaism madness takes the form of obsessive compulsive neurosis; in Christianity it becomes sado-masochism; and in Islam it is megalomania. It is a perceptive insight. There can be little doubt that the Christian obsession with guilt and punishment has been richly productive of sado-masochism in the practices, as well as in the iconography of his adherents. Obsessive-compulsive neurosis is an equally obvious danger for those who follow a highly ritualised

² Paul, *Letter to the Romans*, chapter 7.15-24.

³ Paul, *Letter to the Galatians*, chapter 1.13-14.

religious code, like the Torah. And Woody Allen is a good example of how these tendencies can be entirely secularised. As far as Islam is concerned, there does seem to be a tendency to megalomania, if only in response to what is perceived to be international prejudice against this ancient religion.

If there is anything in Lionel Blue's insight, it might help to account for Paul's crisis, both before and after his conversion. We do not know if he ever met or heard Jesus, and he certainly does not quote him nor show explicit acquaintance with his teaching. What he does is to develop a mystical response to the crucifixion of Jesus, but at its heart we can detect a relieved acceptance of Jesus' critique of code based religion, precisely because it can become a vehicle for obsessive-compulsive neurosis. The best way to get into this is to look at the attitude of Jesus to the Sabbath, because it exemplified his approach to a number of fundamental matters. We invent systems, such as days of rest, to help us to live wisely, but there is a tendency in us to take these useful inventions too seriously and offer them an absolute allegiance. This was the point that Jesus made in his dispute with the legalists of his day.

[6:1] One sabbath while Jesus was going through the grainfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. [2] But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" [3] Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? [4] He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" [5] Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

[6] On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. [7] The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. [8] Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. [9] Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" [10] After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. [11] But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.⁴

Mark's original version of the first of these two incidents is even more significant, because it contains the saying that relativises all human systems, including religious ones, and refuses them any absolute and unchanging authority. They are all human and therefore provisional in their usefulness. The time may come when they have to be modified in response to a particular human need, as in the case of the man with the withered arm in Luke, or replaced entirely by a system that does the job better.

[23] One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. [24] The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" [25] And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? [26] He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." [27] Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

Our danger is that we often make things we invent for a good reason so absolute that they end up defeating the purpose they were intended to serve. There's an amusing example of this in the Robert De Niro comedy, 'Meet the Parents'. Ben Stiller, the hapless hero of the movie, is in an airport departure lounge about to board his plane. The steward calls for passengers in seat-rows nine and above to come forward. Since the departure lounge is completely empty, our

⁴ Luke 6.1-11.

hero steps forward and presents his boarding card for seat-row eight. The steward orders him to step back, because his row has not been called. He remonstrates with her: 'No one else is boarding, why can't I come through now?' 'Because we board by strict rotation of seat row' is the reply. They wait for a few minutes while no one boards; then she calls for all remaining passengers to come forward and he, alone, presents his ticket. Boarding planes by seat-row-rotation makes sense, it assists us in wise living, but to make it an absolute rule in all circumstances is insane. That's the point, the only point in Jesus' dispute about the Sabbath. Exact, compulsive observance of the letter of any code can take us over and drive us mad, as we seek to achieve a perfect conformity to the law or custom.

Whatever the precise nature of Paul's religious torment, he found release from it by a particular application of the teaching of Jesus to his condition. Fatefully, however, rather than proclaiming a new attitude to human codes that would help us to get them into proportion, which is what we get from Jesus, he claimed that the death of Jesus effected a mystical change in the order of things that mechanistically changed relations between God and humanity. Behind the formula he developed to express this doctrine there probably lay an awareness of Jesus' critique of all codes, because they can turn what was meant to assist humanity into a heavy burden round its neck. Paul expressed the liberation he experienced in the metaphor of justification or acquittal: a wretched criminal stands in the dock, tormented by guilt and self-loathing, waiting for certain condemnation; miraculously, the tortured soul is gratuitously acquitted of guilt and set free.

*[8:1] There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*⁵

I think it is more useful to try to figure out the psychological dynamic in this moment of liberation than to be too painstaking about the theology. The theology, in any case, seems to shift around, as have the theories that have been built upon it. For example, the verses just quoted easily lend themselves to the development what is called satisfaction theory, which holds that human sinfulness has built up a colossal debt towards God that we were incapable of paying. Christ can be thought of as offering God satisfaction, though the idea swings between being punished instead of us and offering to God the sacrifice of a perfect human life. In describing the experience, Paul sometimes switches from the law court to the slave market, from the forensic metaphor of acquittal or justification to the metaphor of redemption. Slaves could be freed in a number of ways, including being bought out by a redeemer, the way the poor used to redeem on a Friday night, when the pay packet came in, what they had pawned on Wednesday, when there was no money in the house. Leaving to one side the precise meaning of the metaphors he used, what is beyond dispute is that something radical and liberating happened to Paul which brought him charging into the Christian movement. He associated his sense of liberation with the death and resurrection of Jesus rather than, explicitly, with his teaching. Implicitly, however, there is present in the theology of Paul a link between his own liberation from religious compulsion and the teaching of Jesus.

In his turn, Luther was to achieve a similar catharsis by a similar route. He seems to have been another sick soul, earnestly searching for an elusive perfection through monastic observance. We left him in the monastery privy, meditating on Paul's Letter to the Romans. He could not get

⁵ Romans, 8.1-3.

himself out of the predicament he was in. By definition, he was his own problem: he was a sinner, incapable of achieving righteousness and the spiritual peace it would bring. Instead, the struggle for perfection brought torment. He knew the law's demand was righteous, but he was foul, unable to find peace by following it. Who would rescue him from this captivity? It was the same question that Paul asked and he received the same answer: what he could not achieve by his own efforts was freely made available to him by the grace of Christ. Standing in the dock, guilty as charged, waiting to hear the sentence of death, he is staggered to hear the words of acquittal from the judge that let him out of jail free with no penalty. Another has paid the fine, served the sentence, changed the heart of the judge, pick your metaphor. We get the result, the verdict, what we do not get from either Paul or Luther is a real understanding of the psychological revolution within their own hearts. We get the formula they used to express the catharsis they had experienced, the conclusion of the drama, but we are not let in on how it was psychologically worked out within them. If we can look at another sick soul who went through similar torments we might get a clearer picture of what was going on.

Paul Tillich, the German theologian who emigrated to the US in 1933, where he did his best work, was another troubled religious genius. He struggled unsuccessfully against compulsive sexual relationships that would have had him driven from the American university scene were he alive today. We do not have to guess at the effect this struggle had upon his own inner life, because he has told us in his own words in a famous sermon on a verse from Paul's Letter to the Romans, 5.20: *Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.* For Tillich, in this sermon, the concept of sin is about separation. We experience sin as something that tears us away from our best sense of ourselves, from those we love and from God. This, according to Tillich, was Paul's experience: *'In the picture of Jesus as the Christ, which appeared to him at the moment of his greatest separation from other men, from himself and God, he found himself accepted in spite of his being rejected. And when he found that he was accepted, he was able to accept himself and to be reconciled to others.'*⁶ The title of Tillich's sermon is 'You are accepted' and there can be little doubt that we are looking in on his agonised struggles with his own nature and its compulsions. He uses the phrase 'struck by grace' to capture the justifying moment, the moment that tells us we are accepted in spite of everything we know against ourselves. He writes: *'Do we know what it means to be struck by grace? It does not mean that we suddenly believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the Saviour, or that the Bible contains the truth. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.'*⁷ In this raw and honest passage, Tillich has laid bare the struggles with their own self-hatred that afflict many troubled souls. And it is precisely at the moment of deepest helplessness, when we have given up the pretence that we are other than we are and are not likely to change, that the moment of grace comes, the moment Paul and Luther associated with the work of Jesus, but a moment that comes in many ways to many different people in many different places. It is the moment of acceptance or justification.

⁶ *The Essential Tillich*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p.200.

⁷ *Ibid.* p.201.

This is how Tillich puts it: *'Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later; do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!" If that happens to us, we experience grace. We may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance'.*⁸

In this passage Tillich found the words to convey a liberating human experience that should be more frequent than it is, the moment not of rueful self-acceptance, but of joyful self-acceptance, almost of love of the self. We are well aware today of the deeps and twists in our nature. There is, for instance, the scape-goat phenomenon or what psychologists call 'projective identification' which, if undetected and unadmitted, can be so deadly. There is an ugly example of it in the film *American Beauty* in the person of the tough, manly, fascist American Marine Captain who lives next door to the Kevin Spacey character. It is obvious that the tightly-coiled soldier is a deeply conflicted person, whose self-hatred shows itself in violence towards his son and contempt of anything approaching liberal or hippie values. His son is supplying the Spacey character with the happy weed marijuana, but the captain thinks their relationship is sexual. Persuaded that Spacey is gay, he makes a pass at him and is gently rebuffed. Unable to live with the truth that has just been revealed, he kills the man he has just tried to make love to. He kills in his neighbour what he cannot live with in his own nature. Homophobia is not the only example of this phenomenon, but it is an extremely powerful one, particularly in religious institutions. There is no sadder figure in Christianity than the self-hating gay priest, often allied to reactionary movements that stand for virulent opposition to everything he himself longs for, but refuses to admit. One of the most disfiguring aspects of the Church of England at the moment is the way its gay brigade has become, with many honourable exceptions, captive to this kind of inversion. During the campaign for the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church of the US a close alliance developed between the women's movement and the campaign for gay and lesbian liberation. It was acknowledged that human liberation was indivisible and had to be accepted in total. Self-owning and self-respecting gay men had no difficulty in making alliances with other groups who were victims of prejudice. That did not happen in England, where one of the groups most virulently opposed to women's emancipation was the closeted gay fraternity, many of whom are allied to reactionary movements such as 'Forward in Faith'. Divided within themselves, they lead painfully unjustified lives. Justification or grace comes when we fully acknowledge who and what we are. We say the words to ourselves that define our condition, beyond all denial and dishonesty, just as we will one day have to say Yes to our own dying, another human reality that provokes panic and flight.

There is, I think, an important distinction to be made here. The moment of grace or justification is a moment of self-acceptance, though not necessarily of everything that we have done. We may have done terrible things and there will be a time when we have to come to terms with that; for the moment, however, it is ourselves we must accept unconditionally: 'This is who I am and I must say Yes to myself'. We have to act towards ourselves like the insanely loving father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which is a story of grace and justification. We can still hope and pray that one day we might change and be all the things we long to be, but for now there is only this moment of grace, this moment in which we must run to meet ourselves as we trudge

⁸ Ibid.

away from the far country of self-hatred and say Yes to ourselves. And all of this is consistent with public exposure of our shame, with imprisonment, with the loss of those we love: in the depth of our hearts we have to accept ourselves utterly. We must remember here what Tillich says about not seeking or intending anything other than the moment of self-acceptance. The way I would put it is to say that this moment of grace and justification must not be submitted to for prudential or instrumental reasons, in order to lever change into our lives to bring them up to the required standard. There must be no ulterior motive. The moment of grace and justification has to be absolute and single, bearing only its own meaning and integrity. Even on the scaffold we must be able to say an absolute Yes to this self that is the gratuitous mystery of life in me. To deny that is to deny the closest life gets to me. My life has to be celebrated, utterly accepted. As a matter of act, however, it seems to follow that people who have made this peace with themselves do seem able to live more peacefully and tolerantly with others. You can tell the edgy, conflicted souls, because they are likely to be edgy and conflicted with everyone else.

Justification is a universal human experience, even though it expresses itself within different contexts and takes on the colour of the particular vessel that contains it. In the Christian tradition it is particularly associated with the life of Jesus. We can find liberation in the wisdom of his approach to human systems and the way even the best of them can become tyrannical. The Church has gone further than that, mainly because of the influence of Paul, and has gone on to suggest that the death of Jesus was a forensic act that achieved objective ends. This is the mythic vehicle which bears, for Christians, the universal human experience of justifying grace. Unfortunately, what was a particular way of defining a universal experience has turned into its profoundest limitation. And what was meant to celebrate our freedom has become another way of imprisoning us, this time within a theological formula that turns the experience on its head. Paul did genuinely acknowledge that his moment of liberation was a moment of grace, of sheer gratuitous joy that he was accepted. It is a tragic irony that justification as a theological formula was later required as a qualification for the acceptance of free grace. What is poured out freely is expropriated by religious monopolists and doled out only to their adherents. It's a confidence trick, however. Air cannot be privatised, nor can grace. And, in our hearts, we all know that. If I am already free, I do not need your bail money. I'll end with a poem by Davna Markova that I read as a poem of justification:

*'I will not die an unlived life,
I will not go in fear
Of falling or catching fire.
I choose to inhabit my days,
To allow my living to open to me,
To make me less afraid,
More accessible,
To loosen my heart
Until it becomes a wing,
A torch, a promise.
I choose to risk my significance:
To live.
So that which came to me as seed,
Goes to the next as blossom,
And that which came to me as blossom,
Goes on as fruit'.*

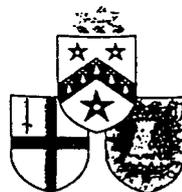
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- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;
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Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH

Tel: 020 7831 0575 Fax: 020 7831 5208

e-mail: enquiries@gresham.ac.uk

Web site : www.gresham.ac.uk